

Rethinking Musical Pasts: The Harballabh Festival of Punjab, c. 1875-1950

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“But isn’t this place, Harballabh, in the Punjab, near Jullundur of all places? my father had asked patronizingly, as though serious music and Punjab were incompatible.

‘I could never have imagined how sensitive and sophisticated the musical tastes of the regular listeners at this festival are. And most of them are Punjabis’, Kesar Bai had said with the air of someone who has witnessed a miracle.¹

—Sheila Dhar

Reading the brief but intelligent article on festivals in Grove’s Dictionary, you become aware of the deep divergence between pre-modern music festivals as symbolic rituals connected with religion and agriculture and modern music festivals as commemorations of great composers or as commercial and tourist attractions... the first type has now receded into a dim anthropological past.²

—Edward Said

Any social structure is the result of interaction and of numerous individual strategies, a fabric that can only be reconstituted from close observation.³

—Carlo Ginzburg

In his article on “Microhistory”, Carlo Ginzburg calls for an approach of historical analysis that privileges the micro-level and local sphere of study, without ignoring macro-level developments in the unfolding of the histories of institutions and phenomena otherwise considered unimportant as objects of analysis. When it comes to studying the social and cultural history of the Punjab, a similar call is needed. Despite the sophisticated analyses which efficiently club together traditional archival work with detailed oral histories and methods closer to conventional anthropology, there remain certain lacunae that impede us from more closely understanding the culture of the Punjab.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is the prevalent image of the Punjab as a land with a predominantly rustic culture. In part this can be seen as a present day remnant of the taxonomising impulses that marked the colonial ethnographic project, capably analysed by scholars like Bernard Cohn. Indeed, this idea of ascribing particular geographical regions of India with definite cultural essences (which of course facilitated colonial governance) was strengthened like never before with the call for “unity in diversity”—Nehru’s maxim for a secular ethos of the independent Indian nation-state, for in order to attain an ever-elusive unity in the face of a bewildering

heterogeneity, neat and definite categorizations for each region and community needed to be established. In the process, however, what was lost was the variety/multiplicity present in each region, one which questioned this image of the typical Assamese, or the typical Maharashtrian, or in our case, the typical Punjabi.

No wonder then, if one were to start writing a history of the 140 year old Harballabh Classical Music Festival of Jalandhar, Punjab, the initial questions of the layperson would mirror the sentiments of Sheila Dhar's father, quoted at the beginning of the essay. It is the very exceptionality, of the chronologically long presence of a classical music festival in the Punjab that is implied by the Harballabh, which prompts a closer examination. It is 'exceptional', because the Punjab is seen as an arena, culturally, of what is qualitatively rustic, loud and brash, and by implication, "low". While this is undoubtedly a layperson's conception of culture in the Punjab—one which corresponds to the image of the loud and boisterous Sikh/Jat peasant as the representative Punjabi subject—there is a long tradition of historiography and scholarly writing in general which has rigorously and consistently couched "the Punjabi" in the image of the peasant. This quintessential peasant also formed the backbone of the conception which monolithically imagined the Sikhs as a 'martial race' especially during the re-construction of the colonial state army begun by commander-in-chief Lord Frederick Roberts in the late 1880s. By 1911, following a change of army recruitment policy away from the 'Hindustani' in favour of the Punjabi, post-1857, the army had acquired a Punjabi representation of almost 54 per cent.⁴

In post-independence India, the emphasis on the Green Revolution and Punjab as the granary of the nation further deepened the image of Punjab as the land of agriculture and importantly, not one of culture.⁵ The realm of music in particular within the more general arena of aesthetics and art is the one where this image is articulated most clearly. Thus the traditional centres for the proliferation of North Indian classical music are considered to be located more firmly in Maharashtra and Bengal rather than anywhere in the north proper, the Punjab being too disconnected from them—geographically and culturally.

In terms of a social history of the music of the Punjab, the objects of analysis have again been limited to more identifiably 'popular' cultural forms and artefacts. Recent work by Michael Nijhawan on the dhad-sarangi tradition and Gibb Schreffler on the *dhol* though pioneering and particularly insightful in their own ways, corroborates this.⁶ I do not assert that these works consciously propagate the stereotype we are questioning here, but wish to further explore their conclusions, and work out a way in which the Harballabh music festival can be understood not only in the more local context of Jalandhar but in the larger one of the developments in the Punjab as a region.

Here I present one particular aspect of the history of the ‘classical’ in north India, within the specific cultural context of the Punjab between 1900 and 1947. The observations are based on work in East Punjab and its musical traditions, accessed through a microhistory of one city, Jalandhar, which annually hosts what is claimed as the *oldest* festival of Hindustani music in India.⁷ Through a focus on the historical trajectory of this one festival within the mofussil context of Jalandhar, I am interested in establishing the different ways in which musical pasts are remembered—firstly in written ‘official’ histories of this festival (including newspapers), alternatively in oral memory, and thirdly in documentary traces obtained from an ethnography of the informal archive maintained by one of the Harballabh Sangeet Mahasabha members.⁸

Differing perspectives from across these three source materials shall be gleaned, revolving around three key questions: contesting definitions of what was ‘classical’ about the music performed, the changes in the performative space itself, and the exclusion of certain groups at the festival. I wish to demonstrate how reliance on a singular category of source material (whether oral memory alone, as done by ethnomusicologists; or on written material alone, such as the souvenirs issued by the Sangeet Mahasabha, for example) produces a partial and incomplete picture of culture. Instead I suggest that in order to have an in-depth historical view of South Asian music, new methodological ground needs to be broken by redefining of traditional parameters of what constitutes an archive with the adoption of a more eclectic vision of what an archive for music more generally could look like. Further, moving beyond the commercial and conventional space of performance at the Harballabh in the present, this paper hopes to access its “dim anthropological past” in Said’s words, in order to re-think the way the past of the festival is imagined today.

To begin with the fundamental question of content: how does one access the changing content of the music performed here over the course of the twentieth century? Is it at all valid to group the kind of music performed here in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century within the present-day rigid categorisation of classical, semi-classical, folk etc.? If one were to go by the ahistorical perspective on the Harballabh as provided by its organizers in the Souvenirs issued annually at every successive festival, it has perennially been classical. Further, there is no qualification about what constitutes the classical; hence no mention is made of the characteristically different tradition of classical music, especially the widely practiced tradition of dhrupad singing, from within the Punjab itself. Instead, there is an underlying assumption that the very word ‘classical’ signifies a cultural meaning which is self-explanatory and does not require further clarification. There is simply a mention of the fact that the progenitor of the festival, Baba Harballabh, was fond of the *dhrupad* genre of classical music; and hardly any mention of the genre again, as evident in the following Decem-

ber 2007 report from *The Tribune* which typifies the ahistoric lionisation of Baba Harballabh as an accomplished musician:

“Baba Harivallabh was a **famous classical music saint-artiste** who believed in preaching bhakti through music, and felt that music was an important means of access to God...His parents died when he was quite young and he started living with his mother’s parents at Jalandhar... The Baba’s tanpura and khara-van are still lying at his Samadhi in Devi Talab Mandir, Jalandhar.

*In the beginning, only saints and musicians from Punjab used to take part in the sammelan but gradually those from all corners of the country started getting attracted to it...”*⁹

As per Dr. Joginder Singh Bawra¹⁰, the principal biographer of the festival, and one who based his 1998 published book on oral testimonies from the 1970s onwards, it is not entirely true that Baba Harballabh was an accomplished musician, as it has been made out in the December 2007 report and in numerous, ever-burgeoning instances from the 1960s onwards. As he puts it, while describing the first festival held to commemorate the memory of Swami Tulja Giri:

In 1875, Harivallabh ji organised a bhandara on the occasion of the first death anniversary of his guru. In order to celebrate this death anniversary, according to the regulations of the sage-community, many saints/hermits and great souls etc. were invited. Swami ji also had a great love for music. He could also sing a little bit of the dhrupad genre. *It is believed that he had received musical education from Shri Duni Chand.* On this occasion, along with a sermon, some programme of classical music also took place.¹¹

This reference describes the precise historical circumstances in which a musical sitting of singers and mystics was initiated by Baba Harballabh. In this account we come across the fact that Baba Harballabh began an impromptu meeting of musicians to collect together and sing, on the occasion of his guru’s death anniversary or *barsi*.

By the next year, in January 1876, the festival underwent further changes because many musicians from across the Punjab, such as Miyan Ahmed Baksh of Phillour, Muhammad Baksh of Hariyana (distt. Hoshiarpur), Vilayat Ali and Meera Baksh of Shyam Chourasi gharana, and musicians from Jadla, Amritsar and Lahore also joined in.¹² Across the oral and written record, we hear of how the primary audience of this festival was comprised of mainly saints, ascetics—*sadhus, sants, fakirs, pirs*—who collected for this annual mystic mela, to listen and sing to music for purposes of *bhakti* and *ibadat*, to commune with the divine.

Oral testimonies from the exponents of the Punjab’s Talwandi gharana of *dhrupad* singing such as Bhai Baldeep Singh in India and Ayesha Mahmood in Pakistan maintain that the first sitting in 1875 occurred when a *nazrana* of one and a half rupees was offered to Miyan Kalandhar Baksh

Talwandiwale by Baba Harballabh.¹³ Bawra's detailed ethnography carried out in a sustained manner through the 1960s and 1970s helps us understand the popularity of the dhrupad during the initial days of the Harballabh.¹⁴ Referring to a dhrupad composition in the Raga Bilawal, Bawra tells us how it was composed by Naath Raam of Batala and disseminated to the Haryana musicians by Baba Harballabh. This instance brings to the fore the important centre of musical exchange which this mela must have been (a major attribute of its regional fame in the early years), with musicians coming forth and performing in an atmosphere of camaraderie, marked with a mandate for singing for the divine, for a mystic cross-communal purpose of *bhakti* and *ibadat*. Another small vignette, which captures the lyrics of a dhrupad composition, illustrates this cosmopolitan, inter-religious sphere very vividly:

In Rag Bilawal, Miyan Muhammad Hussain of Haryana would usually sing the following dhrupad-

Sahsar gopi ek kanhaiya, ya dekhon main raam

Dehar mein maseet mein but khane mein maykhane mein

Koi to bole kalma nabi ka, koi bulawe ram ki jai."

(*Thousand gopis (milk-maidens) but only one Krishna, or should I look at Rama?*

In the household, the mosque, the temple or even the tavern;

*Someone recites the injunctions of the Prophet while someone proclaims victory to Ram.)*¹⁵

Apart from oral history alone, a close, detailed ethnography of the locally maintained archive yielded some crucial documentary traces which proved that unlike the norm today, *khayal* was not always the predominant genre performed. Rather, a rare invitation letter surviving from 1924, i.e. two years after the Sangeet Mahasabha was officially created, testifies to the popularity of non-raga popular music such as the Punjabi *kaafiyān*, the *shabd saakhi* or the devotional *devi ki bhetaan* amongst even the elite notables to whom the letter was addressed, and who were the foremost patrons of the festival. Despite the main attraction being classical and raga music, the reference to genres which are of these quintessentially non-classical items can thus be seen as a means to attract a wider audience via these more popular genres and draw them towards classical music through the backdoor, as it were.

While the official history of the festival (accessed through Souvenirs and replicated on a recently constructed website) has a clear chronology that provides us with the date of the establishment of the Sangeet Mahasabha, it does not historicise the reasons behind its establishment or indeed the changes the Mahasabha subsequently wrought in the performative space at the Harballabh. We get an idea of the latter from the documentary traces mentioned above, in this case a notice issued in November 1928, a month before the festival is to take place, which outlaws the public presentation of gifts or money to musicians at the Harballabh stage or the reception of the same by any musician. Instead,

‘if any sahib wishes to give, then he is requested to call the singer to his home or visit the singer at the house where he is staying, and give him the reward there. Please do not try to give rewards in the sabha itself. Despite this request if any musician will accept rewards in this sabha, then his to-and-fro rent and reward will be seized.

Note: It is strictly forbidden to have cigarette, cigar in the sabha under any circumstances. The person, who makes any kind of noise and hullabaloo or instigates fights and brawls, will have to hand over his ticket to the police and will be thrown out by them.¹⁶

This notice captures in miniature how the space of performance at the Harballabh was modernised and nationalised under the aegis of the Sangeet Mahasabha, which was formally instituted six years previously in 1922. There is a championing of a performative style completely divorced from the strong associations with pleasure and entertainment, which practices such as the spontaneous bestowal of gifts in cash and kind by besotted listeners to the musicians signify. These practices date a long way back in the performative arena of Indian music and dance. The problem with this practice for the patrons, apart from the overt divisions and discontent it creates amongst different musicians by persons external to the Sangeet Mahasabha¹⁷, is that it smacks of an asymmetrical power relationship between patron and performer, reminiscent of the traditional *jajman-mirasi* relationship, with the patron belonging to a higher caste and the performer hailing from a lower status caste group. However, as Janaki Bakhle has reminded us, Pt. Paluskar “institutionalised a Brahminic Hinduism as the modal cultural form of Indian music... by placing religiosity at the forefront of his pedagogy.”¹⁸ Behind this disavowal of the unpredictable and arbitrary bestowal of gifts on musicians by audience members is thus the hallowed feature espoused and begun by Paluskar, of treating the Harballabh as a place to perform at out of respect, and not for merely mercenary purposes.¹⁹ For a Paluskarite self-definition of musicians who perform for primarily devotional purposes, the remotest possibility of being equated with lowly ‘mirasis’ is unthinkable, especially at a place which is by now *believed* to harbour a tradition of music with an ancient and purely classical lineage.

The reference to disciplining the audience in the little ‘note’ at the end of the above notice, upholds new, modern, disciplined and bourgeois norms for audience behaviour.²⁰ In this new era of the onset of a new kind of classical music, struggling to be upheld as a respectable middle-class profession in itself, such practices needed to be outlawed, if the new bourgeoisie could attend the Harballabh, the dates of which had also been changed from January to the December Christmas vacation by the late 1920s to suit its needs. Such a strategy also favoured the new, middle-class performer anxious of being treated on par with, or higher than traditionally lower-caste performers of music. These new middle class musicians can be

evidenced in the many examples of the Arya Samaj anniversary celebrations in Lahore which *The Tribune* of the 1920s and 1930s is replete with.²¹ Hence, saying “no” to the money offered to them is an effort to establish themselves as upholders of a hallowed tradition ‘of the gods’, aiming for a respectability as musicians that came necessarily with patina of religious devotionism.

The strict instruction and official exclusion of any musician who does accept such sullied rewards is radically new, for hitherto “musicians thought of themselves first as artistes and inheritors of a particular performance-based tradition. How might they have responded to Paluskar’s foregrounding of Hindu religious beliefs in his musical pedagogy?”²² In the strict outlawing of this practice and the dire warning to musicians, we get an inkling of how some musicians indeed must have reacted to the strictures of those upholding a sanitized and newly ‘respectable’ version of performance. For unless there indeed *were* musicians who accepted gifts in this manner, how could the need to publish a didactic notice written in such terms arise?

This redefinition and conscious restructuring of music was of course part of the concomitant pan-Indian thrust towards reforming culture, and assigning it with a new, modern respectability. In the realm of north Indian music two Maharashtrians, Pt. V.N. Bhatkhande and Pt. V.D. Paluskar took on the mantle of this reformation. Paluskar visited the Harballabh first around 1900, concomitant with the establishment of his first Gandharv Mahavidyalaya at Lahore and has been a towering figure in the subsequent history of the Harballabh. The abovementioned notice is thus a singular documentary trace that captures much larger processes in microcosm. As crucial as the new discipline and austerity which music at the Harballabh now came under, was the privileging of a nationally recognisable format of *khayal*-centred classical music at the festival. This genre was popularized at Jalandhar by Paluskar and subsequently by the steady stream of his disciples like Vinayak Rao Patwardhan, Narayan Rao Vyas and Omkarnath Thakur. While this was in the realm of performative genres, the social space of the Harballabh also underwent a transformation after the intervention of Paluskar. As per newspaper reportage in the Punjab-wide English national daily *The Tribune* from the 1930s and especially the 1940s onwards, the presence of Paluskar’s disciples became a pre-eminent feature, right up to the 1970s. In the process, those who lost out were the Punjabi musicians, and in particular the mostly Muslim *dhrupadiyas* whose voices had struck the first notes at the Harballabh Mela. Thus, contrary to conventional belief resident in oral memory that partition in 1947 resulted in the decline of Muslim musicians in the Indian Punjab, the evidence from *The Tribune* reveals that this exclusionary trend in music already had been inaugurated, wittingly or unwittingly by Paluskar and his pupils, almost two decades prior to that cataclysm.

Comparable to the physical exclusion of Muslims from the festival is the de-Islamicisation of even the pasts of the festival and the Devi-Talab *sakti peeth* site in official accounts of the festival and some popular histories in Hindi. This convenient excision of the substantial Islamic heritage of the city, the site and the festival itself is rectified through the work of accessing gazetteers, a staple archival strategy of historians, as also detailed oral history interviews, which yield incontrovertible evidence of the strong Islamic character of Jalandhar pre-1947, e.g. the census reports quoted in the gazetteers, and more importantly, the lists of the many myriad fairs and festivals for Jalandhar district collated by colonial ethnographers, apart, of course, from numerous references from oral history. A good example is the description of the nature of the *langar*²³ set up during the Harballabh festival in the early twentieth century, as per the testimony of the famed musician and disciple of Pt. V.D. Paluskar, Onkarnath Thakur:

Shops would be set up from the Tanda Road Gaushala (cow shelter) to the Devi Talab. On the corner of the lake as well there would be shops set up. A free *langar* as well as a milk *langar* would also be on. Village folk would bring grains and milk and a very huge food stall would be set up. Less of tea and most often milk alone would be served. Hermits, recluses, *dhuni*-warming saints would come in large numbers and very often the *gaddi nasheen* mahants would arrive astride their elephants. From the side of the temple, food for the saints, wood along with feed for the horses and elephants would be given.²⁴

The references to these big food *langars* is thus important, and underlines for us the devotional way in which people of Jalandhar supported the festival, very much within the matrix of devotion to a local saint, on a very sacrally charged *sakti-peeth* site, and elaborates the ties of the festival with popular religion. Further, Muslim traders and owners of warehouses donated the wood for the *dhunas*²⁵ for atleast 50-60 *sadhus* which lasted for a week and also for the preparation of food in the *langar* up until 1946. According to Shastri, all of this was donated for free.²⁶ The city of Jalandhar in any case was renowned for its sufi saints and their many shrines, the foremost of which was that of Imam Nasir, the celebration of its *urs* mela being a major event.²⁷ Sir Richard Temple's three-volume study entitled *The Legends of the Punjab* has a 40 page-long chapter which records the songs and oral traditions of 'The Saints of Jalandhar'.²⁸ Given all such connected references as also the record of oral memory, it would thus be fallacious to postulate that the only people who patronised and participated in the festival were Hindus alone, the impression one gets from the overwhelmingly Hindu patronage of the festival today. This image also is reinforced given that the grounds on which the festival is held is predominantly colonized by the temple today, after a rather ungraceful tussle with the Sangeet Mahasabha that originally owned the land.²⁹

imagining an alternative public sphere of culture where musicians, mystics and music enthusiasts from varied backgrounds gather to revel in the flow of music. This conception, though grounded in a celebration of the notion of Punjabiya (which some might argue is yet another kind of myth) and music's original *saanjhi virasat*, stands up to the tyranny of the contra-conception which perpetuates an image of the north or Punjab (in the realm of music) where it becomes endowed with an ancient and golden lineage of sacred "Hindu" music, corrupted by subsequent 'invaders', read the 'Muslim'. Bawra constructs an image of the region that establishes its links to the larger Indian nation, restoring Punjab's fragile self-image of being a culturally endowed centre of civilization in defiance of the popular expression that it is "a land of only agriculture and no culture":

On the basis of the evidence and proofs provided by the searches of history, light has been thrown on the fact that the creation of world's most ancient religious book, 'Rig Veda' was done on this holy land. The ancient name of the Punjab, 'Brahmavarta' is a symbol of the fact that *first and foremost the Creator of the world, Brahma ji, created this land and it was here that the rays of human civilisation first burst forth, whose light spread all over the world.*

The earth of the Punjab being excessively fertile, gold in the form of grain is produced here. This "bird of gold" had to face the negative ambitions of the foreign attackers. Due to this, the art of music wasn't able to develop in the Punjab as much as it did in South India.

The swaras from the flute of Lord Krishna and the rabab of Guru Nanak Dev ji echoed here, while various gurus, saints and prophets accepted music as an instrument of divine devotion and sang the praises of the Lord by singing their devout compositions in sweet music. *The fact that the 'baani' (voice of God) is received in the Guru Granth Sahib (Sikh holy book) in 62 raagas, is a mark of the pedestal on which the Gurus placed music and the importance they attached to it.*³⁰

As is evident from Bawra's formulation, it is on the Punjab's 'holy land' where the Rig Veda was composed, and further, the Punjab itself enjoyed a priority, way above the rest, in being created and called into existence by Brahma, the Creator. Having established the origins of the Punjab in a firmly Hindu universe, Bawra goes on to build the more conventional narrative of a prosperity that is time immemorial, and holding the resulting invasions responsible for the subsequent poverty of the development of music as opposed to South India. This contrast with South India, is something that pre-figures in the arguments put forth by many Orientalist writings on music in North and South India.³¹ Further, the sacrality of music, beginning in a Hindu universe, finds its ultimate fruition in the efforts of the Sikh gurus who set the verses of the Guru Granth Sahib to raga-music. For Bawra, then, though to differing degrees, music had a glorious past and Punjab occupies pride of place in the Vedic origins of Indian music,

which for him is identified with “Hindu” music.³² The ingenuity of Bawra’s formulation shows us how in order to make sense of the Harballabh in the larger national context he needs to play up the prevalent stereotype of Punjab as culturally backward—the specific reason conveniently being the recurring invasions.

It is this reasoning that ignores the substantial contribution of the sufi *pirs*, but especially of the Muslim musicians to the Punjab musical repertoire. Nowhere in this formal scheme, thus, is mention made of the substantial contribution of the sufis to the Punjab musical repertoire, or indeed the non-canonical Sikh musicians (such as Ramdasis³³ or Partaal³⁴ practitioners). While I am quoting translations and not the text in original Hindi, the linguistic requirements of writing in a pure Hindi further strengthen the myth of a unitary homogenous Hindu sphere, rubbing out the multivocalities of Punjab musical culture within which this festival was born.³⁵ This is not to say that no mention of Muslim musicians is made—in fact Bawra meticulously offers us details of how the first performers at the festival were definitely Muslims from the region. However, Muslim names remain merely that: names—while an unrelenting obliteration of any mention of the substantial Islamic heritage of music in India and in particular the Punjab proceeds unhindered. In other words, Muslim musicians seem to be incidental to the whole enterprise of music as it is thought to have originated, and performed, in a largely Hindu sphere. To some extent, this may also reflect the particular temporal context of Bawra, who writing in the 1997-2003 period must surely have been affected by the currents of thought wherein the purity of the past and its ‘Hindu’ nature were seen coterminously.³⁶ I highlight this point because Jalandhar has had a powerful Islamic heritage itself, being a major centre of sufi shrines, having a substantial settlement of Muslims here since at least the twelfth century.³⁷

The larger context of the emergent public sphere for culture in the Punjab with its centre at Lahore needs to be kept in mind, one where the specific realm of music was crucially linked to Hinduism, especially the powerful Arya Samaj current which instituted the *satsang* as a crucial, definitive part of its weekly and monthly activities. In such a milieu then, it was apposite for the organisers of the Harballabh too, to speak in similar terms, when the link with divinity was tied explicitly, conspicuously and programmatically to making classical music respectable, and cleansing any connotation it had with its *mirasi* practitioners.

In opposition to this tying in of music with divinity as part of a clear agenda to make music respectable, the organic link of music with mysticism—definitive of the origins of the Harballabh—points to an eclectic, egalitarian bhakti tradition of Hinduism, where Muslim musicians and audience members (*pirs* and *fakirs*) were an integral part of the annual *barsi* of a Hindu Brahmin mahant, coming together for reasons of sharing in a celebration of mystical music making.³⁸ A good example of this comes

from the memoir of the musician Onkarnath Thakur as recorded by Bawra, which also gives us an important insight into the changing dynamics of the physical space of the Devi Talab grounds:

There was a temple at the corner of the talab. Next to the mandir a pandaal would be set up that would be quite big. Listeners would sit in a great number. Later on this mela began to be organised in the middle of the dry Devi Talab. At that time trees and plants were in plenty on these grounds and nearby was the hospice of Shah Sikandar. *At that time there was no wall between the Devi Talab and the mazaar. Baba Hemgiri and Shah Sikandar's shrine (mazaar) were constructed close to each other only.* Here, a wrestling ground for... wrestlers was also there... On one side a poetical gathering of *baintbaazi* would also establish itself.³⁹

What is interesting here is the way in which Onkarnath Thakur implicitly points to the fact of there being no walls between the shrine of Shah Sikandar (who in the official narrative celebrating the legendary powers of Baba Hemgiri, is defined as a low usurper, across the sources) and that of Baba Hemgiri (*mahant* of Devi Talab shaki peeth site). Further, in an intriguing slip from his conventional purified Hindi, Bawra describes Baba Hemgiri's shrine in Urdu terms as "mazaar" (not its Hindi equivalent, the usual "samadhi"), in a rare and wonderful linguistic clubbing together of the two adversarial Hindu and Muslim saints.⁴⁰ Instead of seeing it as a mere slip of language, this instance shows us how traces of the shared past, despite its share of antagonisms, crop up and survive the internal, ideological filters/censors of the chroniclers. Onkarnath Thakur must have indeed emphasised the absence of walls, for this almost unconscious note of upholding a semi-syncretic tradition to creep in so unequivocally. It is important to underline this, because it is a small example in the extensive writings of Bawra on the Hemgiri-Shah Sikandar conflict, which, at all other times, like that of Krishnanda Shastri's account on the history of Jalandhar, is written in carefully antagonistic terms.⁴¹

The references above point to an inclusive trend of bhakti-based Hinduism in the Punjab, which was to be subtly overshadowed in the years to come. This character of the Harballabh in its original phase was vastly different from the self-consciously, overtly sacred and exclusivist Hindu veneer that the festival has come to acquire, especially in recent decades. Emphasising such a space at the Harballabh means that we need to go beyond the facade of sacrality which is part of the prevalent trend in Indian classical music: a conspicuous obsequiousness to divine origins, tied closely to the fashioning of a programmatic Hindu identity, the result of Paluskar's project.⁴² This emphasis is important if we are to recover the ways in which sacrality and the divine were associated with music in a non-sectarian, inclusive fashion, in a sphere where intercommunal conversation and interaction was the norm. This was in sharp contrast to the later era,

when efforts to modernise and classicise this music took place in a *colonial* public sphere, in which a bourgeois modernity very often combined with a strong communitarian identities. Such contradictions of colonialism and the attendant crystallisation of identities in all spheres of life on the basis of a highly homogenised, *sans* internal contradictions, religious community lent their impress on the world of music as well.

To conclude, the process of researching a social microhistory of music in the Punjab has established how excessive reliance on the sanitized and official histories of a particular cultural institution produces a partial, uniform and watered down account of what is otherwise rich and contested terrain. It is through a close ethnography of the archive available at Jalandhar, reading between the lines of the anecdotes and accounts available in the documentary traces showcased above, recording of oral memory, and corroboration from more conventionally archival sources such as gazetteers and newspaper reports that an approximation of our musical pasts can be fully attempted.

Notes and References

An earlier version of this Paper was first presented at the 74th Session of the Indian History Congress, held in Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, 28-30 December, 2013.

- 1 Sheila Dhar, 'The Muse and The Truck Drivers', *Raga'n Josh: Stories from a Musical Life*, Hatchette India, 2005, pp.177-178. Having grown up in a Mayur Kayastha family of Delhi which attached great importance to musical sensitivity, followed by a lifelong commitment to understanding, discovering and being intimately acquainted with the world of North Indian classical music, the late musician Sheila Dhar, that inimitable and deft wielder of words, has left behind invaluable fragments of insights into that world.
- 2 Edward Said, 'Pomp and Circumstance (on Musical Festivals)' in *Music at the Limits: Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music*, London: Bloomsbury, p.23. Originally appeared in *The Nation*, August 30, 1986.
- 3 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: One or Two Things I Know About It', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Autumn, 1993), p. 33.
- 4 See Rajit Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab*, Permanent Black, New Delhi: 2003, pp. 15-19.
- 5 At the very least it was not seen as a possessor of the culture that was seen as crucial and definitive of the new Indian nation-state. Further, celebrating the culture of a region with a powerful syncretic tradition such as that possessed by the Punjab presupposed intimate connections to the now estranged West Punjabi heartland and was a source of discomfort, and not in keeping with the troubled spirit of those times. It is only in the last 20-25 years that these connections have been openly emphasized, particularly driven ahead by peace initiatives by civil society groups such as Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace & Democracy, as well as an increasing presence of Pakistani singers in Bollywood, facilitated by technology-induced flows of culture across the borders.
- 6 See Michael Nijhawan, *Dhadi Darbar: Religion and Violence in the Performance of Sikh History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi: 2006 and Gibb Schreffler, "Signs of Separation: *Dhol* in Punjabi Culture", Unpublished Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2010. The only exception to this trend is a monograph in Hindi entitled *Punjab Ki Sangeet Parampara* by Geeta Paintal (New Delhi: Radha

- Publications, 1988) which though more comprehensive, serves more as a compendium on various facets of music in Punjab, lacking in-depth contextualization.
- 7 The festival was known as a Rag Mela upto the 1950s after which it took on the more prosaic epithet of Sangeet Sammelan.
 - 8 According to Paul Ricoeur, the historical past is real, in so far as evidence of it survives in what he calls 'traces' of the past, which for him range from documents, eye-witness accounts and testimonies to the memories of individuals. However, I wish to maintain a distinction between 'documentary traces' *outside* of the conventional archive, such as letters, diaries, public notices, ticket receipts, etc, and 'oral traces' residing in people's memories. In any case, the second kind of trace is methodologically defined by the sub-discipline of oral history. Ricoeur, Paul, (trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer) *Time and Narrative, Vol. I*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
 - 9 Harvinde Khetal, "Harballabh Sangeet torch glows", *Arts Tribune*, Friday, December 26, 2007, p.15. Emphases Added. The Devi Talab of Jalandhar, the grounds where the Harballabh is held, is one of the 52 *sakti peeth* sites sacred in Hinduism.
 - 10 The late Dr. Joginder Singh Bawra, born in 1936 in Montgomery district of west Punjab (now Pakistan) was a wonderful combination of musician, musicologist, teacher and in his later years, public relations expert for the Shree Baba Harballabh Sangeet Sammelan Mahasabha, apart from being a classmate and guru-bhai of the late ghazal singer Jagjit Singh. He had an illustrious career in music education in the Punjab Educational Services spanning 3 decades. Jalandhar resident since 1948, PhD holder from the Faculty of Music at University of Delhi and author of 5 books, Dr. Bawra passed away in 2003, the year of publication of his second book on the Harballabh. Both his works are the main pillar on which this paper is based. J.S. Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, Jalandhar: Sangeet Kala Manch Publications, 1998 and *Harivallabh Darpan*, Jalandhar: Sangeet Kala Manch Publications, 2003. Henceforth Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan* and Bawra, *Harivallabh Darpan* respectively.
 - 11 Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, p.22. Emphasis added.
 - 12 Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, p.23.
 - 13 As per interviews conducted in December 2011.
 - 14 Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, pp.23-24.
 - 15 Ibid. I am grateful to Sonia Wigh for help with this translation.
 - 16 Krishnanda Shastri, *Trigartapradesh Jalandhar: Aitihasik aivam Dharmik Drishtikona*, Mai Heeran Gate, Jalandhar: Bharatiya Sanskrit Bhawan, 1998, p.128. Henceforth Shastri, *Trigartapradesh*. The reference to punishing anyone indulging in fights or brawls is corroborated by evidence from newsreports in *The Tribune*, which for the years 1937, 1939 and 1940 report 'rowdyism' in the audience at the Harballabh. See Radha Kapuria, "A Muse for Music: The Harballabh Musician's Fair of Punjab, 1947-2003", Unpublished MPhil Dissertation, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2013, Annexure II, 'Music and Lahore: (The constitution of the norms of cultural practice', pp. 197-209, for more details. Henceforth Kapuria, "A Muse".
 - 17 After all, the *mahant* (religious superior, in particular the chief priest of a temple) and the Mahasabha after him continued bestowing the *jai patra* (victory-letter) or *jai mala* (garland of victory) to a musician, as part of formal procedure which continues in an altered form even today.
 - 18 Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.173.
 - 19 Accidentally arriving at the Harballabh in approximately 1901, some six years after the death of Baba Harballabh, Pandit Vishnu Digamber Paluskar's discovery of the Devi-Talab was a turning point in the history of the mela. See Bawra, p.30; and

- Kapuria, "A Muse", pp.58-59. This is in direct contrast to the practice he began of charging admission fees for performances in public. See Bonnie Wade, *Khyal: Creativity within North India's classical music tradition*, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, pp.43-44 for more details.
- 20 Bakhle also notes how Paluskar's success lay in welding together Hindu devotion-
alism and nationalism with the bourgeois aspirations of the rising middle classes:
"In Paluskar's successful cooptation of the public sphere, one sees clearly how
the commingling of religious instruction with musical education cemented the
identification of the culture of the bourgeoisie as Hindu." Bakhle, p.177. Emphasis
Added.
 - 21 See Kapuria, "A Muse", pp. 63-65 and also Annexure II.
 - 22 Bakhle, p.173.
 - 23 The Punjabi term for 'free kitchen' where food is provided, usually at Sikh
gurudwaras, to all irrespective of caste or social background.
 - 24 Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, pp. 28-29.
 - 25 A wood-fire burnt by mainly Hindu ascetics for devotional purposes.
 - 26 Shastri, *Trigartapradesh*, p.114.
 - 27 'Fairs and religious gatherings', *Punjab District Gazetteers, Vol. XIV A, Jullundur
District and Kapurthala State with Maps, 1904*, Lahore: The "Civil and Military
Gazette" Press (Sole Contractors for printing to the Punjab Government), 1908.
Part A, pp.144-146.
 - 28 Richard Temple, *Legends of the Panjab*, Vol.3, Bombay: Education Society's Press
and London: Trubner & Co., [1884-1900].
 - 29 Radha Kapuria, "Redefining Music's Sacrality: The Harballabh Music Festival of
Punjab, 1997-2003" in the Contemporary India section of the *Proceedings of the
72nd Indian History Congress* held at Patiala in 2011.
 - 30 Bawra 2003, p. 48. Emphases added.
 - 31 Margaret Cousins in her 1935 work *Music of the Occident and Orient* tells us, "In
India, life is religion and religion is life. Until the advent of the Muhammadans into
India, there was no secular type of music. In South India, all the themes are still
religious only and a music party is more like a prayer meeting than an entertaining
concert." Quoted in Lakshmi Subramanian 2006, p.1. For Cousins, music in South
India is redeemed to a pristine religious quality, in keeping with its apparently
Indian essence, thanks to the fact that the advent of "Muhammadans into India"
did not impact the South as it did the North. This argument is echoed, albeit more
explicitly, in Bawra's formulation.
 - 32 For similar perspectives in the context of the history of Jalandhar in general, see
Shastri, *Trigartapradesh*, *op. cit.*
 - 33 Amongst the Sikh gurus, Guru Ramdas used to play the sarinda, which is a stringed
folk instrument similar to lutes or fiddles, played with a bow. The fifth Guru Arjan
Dev is renowned for having set the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib to raga
music. I am grateful to Mr. Naresh Kumar for the information and knowledge
regarding the types of music prevalent in the Punjab, discussed here.
 - 34 Partaal gaayaki of the Sikh tradition, having its affinities with dhrupad needs to be
further understood, especially in terms of how far it flourished in the eastern Pun-
jab in and around Jalandhar. Curiously enough, whether in Bawra, or in Shastri,
or the souvenirs of the Harballabh Sangeet Mahasabha itself, the reference to Sikh
participation is very scarce. Like the Muslims, but to an even lesser degree, the Sikh
musical heritage is simply not mentioned except for the exceptional case of the
Namdharis of Bhaini Sahib, Ludhiana. According to contemporary commentators,
this genre has not seen commensurate patronage from official, panthic Sikhism
either, leading to marginalisation from within as well.

- 35 Even while mentioning the eclectic shared space within which this festival originated, the terms used for the holy men coming together for performing and listening to music for purposes of mystic devotion are '*sant-sadhu-mahatma*', the Muslim terms of '*pir-fakir*' hardly ever being invoked. It is in exactly such a way that certain exclusivist meanings get ascribed to the Harballabh, overstressing its Hindu character.
- 36 Kapuria, "Redefining Music's Sacrality", 2011.
- 37 Imam Nasir is, according to the oral testimony of the present-day gaddi nasheen caretaker of the shrine, apparently 1083 years old shrine of the Chishti saint Hazrat Imam Nasiruddin Abu Yusuf Chishti who came to Jalandhar in the eleventh century from Iran. His fellow and contemporary *pir* Baba Farid Ganj Shakar of PakPattan (Ajodhan, present-day Pakistan) is said to have visited this place in the thirteenth century and a memorial has been built to commemorate his visit. See H.S. Dilgeer, *Encyclopedia of Jalandhar*, Belgium: Sikh University Press, 2004, p.61. This matches with the oral testimony I recorded with the caretaker of the shrine in October 2011.
- 38 The Devi Talab had seen a brief period of Hindu-Muslim antagonism in the late eighteenth early nineteenth century, with the Muslim *pir* Shah Sikandar who apparently usurped a considerable part of the landscape, and to vanquish whom Baba Himgiri (guru of Tuljgiri, and who, it seems, revived the institution and seat of *mahant* of the seat) was called upon from Hoshiarpur. The local prevalence of the rivalry between mystic saints, rival Hindu and Muslim, with the story of Imam Nasir and the local Nath yogi who was defeated in a battle of mystical wits, much like the way Himgiri defeated Shah Sikandar many centuries later in the eighteenth century. What is interesting, therefore, are the ways in which a mystic egalitarianism and cosmopolitanism, papered over a history of minor antagonisms, for the interest of a musical communion with the divine, shared alike by Hindus and Muslims.
- 39 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
- 40 It is on very few exceptions that Bawra takes a detour from the pure almost official-ese Hindi of his prose and takes a flight into words from Urdu and/or Hindustani.
- 41 See Shastri, *Trigartapardesh*, p.105. He gives the following account of Baba Hemgiri. Apparently, he was called from Bajwara (Hoshiarpur) in order to liberate the sakti peeth from the encroachment of Muslim saint Shah Sikandar and Bhure Khan. Hemgiri received support from Ranjit Singh's diwan, Lala Lakshman Das, whose army stayed on this site for 6 months, and helped the lake to be filled with water again. For a similar account, see also Bawra, *Harivallabh Darshan*, pp.10-12.
- 42 Bakhle *op.cit.*

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